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**District Health Will Bring Obesity Epidemic
Into Focus at High School During Public Health Month**

During the past few decades, the prevalence of overweight adults and children has grown to epidemic proportions. Currently, more than 50 percent of the U.S. population is overweight, and approximately 20 percent of them are extremely overweight or obese.

Even more alarming, 25 percent of children and adolescents are overweight. Excess weight in childhood and adolescence has been found to predict being overweight as an adult, according to the American Obesity Association (AOA). Children with obesity, age 10 to 13, are reported to have a 70 percent likelihood of obesity persisting into adult years.

To bring this growing problem into focus for youth, South Central District Health will be conducting an epidemiological study with Twin Falls High School students during Public Health Month in April. Maggi Machala, MPH, RN, SCDH Director of Community Health, and Wendi Lane, MPH, SCDH Epidemiologist, will lead members of Mr. Reynolds' Health Occupations class through a study to determine some of the causes of childhood obesity and how it might be prevented.

About half of all deaths in the U.S. can be attributed to largely preventable behaviors and exposures, with tobacco use and poor diet/physical inactivity accounting for the majority of preventable deaths, according to a study in the March 10, 2004, issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Researchers have found that the leading causes of death in 2000 were tobacco (435,000 deaths or 18.1 percent of total U.S. deaths) followed closely by poor diet and physical inactivity (400,000 deaths; 16.6 percent).

Obesity rates for U.S. adults have increased by 60 percent since 1991 and childhood obesity has doubled over the last 30 years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The rapid increase in the prevalence of overweight adults and children means that the number of deaths from heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, for which being overweight and obese are major contributing factors, are likely to increase substantially in the next few years, according to the *JAMA* report.

The rise in diabetes rates is especially troubling. Diabetes rates have risen along with obesity rates, up 50 percent in the last 10 years, and 50 to 80 percent of diabetes cases can be attributed to improper diet and inactivity. Type 2 diabetes, typically seen only in adults, has increased dramatically in children and adolescents in a short period, according to the American Obesity Association. The parallel increase of obesity in children and adolescents is reported to be the most significant factor for the rise in diabetes. Type 2 diabetes accounted for 2 to 4 percent of all childhood diabetes before 1992, but skyrocketed to 16 percent by 1994, according to AOA.

Idaho studies from the Idaho Behavioral Risk Factor Survey and Youth Risk Behavior Survey show that trends for south central Idaho are, unfortunately, going the wrong direction, said Maggi Machala, RN. "In 1998, 51.8 percent of adults in south central Idaho reported being overweight, and that number increased to 57.8 percent in 2002. In 2003, 30.1 percent of Idaho adolescents reported being overweight. This isn't just a national problem, it is happening right here in our area."

Being overweight or obese are tied directly to lack of physical activity and diet, said Machala. Data shows that the number of adults in south central Idaho who did not eat five servings of fruits and

vegetables each day had increased from 71 percent in 1996 to 78.9 percent in 2002 and 19.4 percent of adults did not exercise regularly in 2002, said Machala. Adults should participate in at least 30 minutes of moderate activity at least five days each week, she said.

“Even more alarming,” said Machala, “is the fact that 33.6 percent of adolescents reported no regular physical activity in 2003. As the most inactive generation ever in history, today’s youth are at a further disadvantage by having less physical education programs in schools. Children and adolescents should participate in 60 minutes of vigorous activity at least five days each week.”

The U.S. Dept. of Agriculture estimates that healthier diets could save \$71 billion annually in medical costs and lost productivity, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that increased physical activity could save \$77 billion annually in medical costs.